

STAFF SUMMARY SHEET

	TO	ACTION	SIGNATURE (Surname), GRADE AND DATE		TO	ACTION	SIGNATURE (Surname), GRADE AND DATE
1	DFH Fac Develop	sig	<i>[Signature]</i> 10 Feb 2014	6			
2	DFH Area Deputy	sig	<i>[Signature]</i> Lt Col 10 Feb 14	7			
3	DFH	sig	<i>[Signature]</i> O-6 14 Feb 14	8			
4	DFER	approve	SOLTS AD 22, 20 FEB 14	9			
5	DFH	action		10			

SURNAME OF ACTION OFFICER AND GRADE
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SYMBOL

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INITIALS

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SUSPENSE DATE

Not Applicable

SUBJECT

Clearance for Material for Public Release

USAFA-DF-PA-

55

DATE

10 Feb 14

SUMMARY

1. PURPOSE. PA clearance for essay competition and publication for The Society for Army Historical Research Essay Prize.

2. BACKGROUND.

Authors: Cadet Conor F. Melanson

Title: "Oglaigh na hEireann" (The Irish Republican Army): An examination of how the IRA manipulated British Security Forces in Ireland to achieve independence.

Release Information: Unrestricted public release

3. DISCUSSION. The paper is regarded to be of the highest quality produced by this cadet. He produced it to fulfill the writing assignment in History 363, Unconventional Warfare, during the fall 2013 semester.

4. VIEWS OF OTHERS. N/A

5. RECOMMENDATION. Approve for unrestricted public release and publication.

[Signature]
JOHN D. ROCHE, Lt Col, USAF
Assistant Professor

1 Tab

Title of Paper/Presentation

The Society for Army Historical Research Essay Prize Competition

Entrant's Details and Declaration

This form should be reproduced in your essay as its first page. Your essay will not be considered unless it contains this form.

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Year of Study: 5

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By filling my name and other personal details in the space below, I hereby declare that:

- This is new work written by myself that has not been submitted previously to other competitions.
- This essay acknowledges the source material that has been used in its production through references.
- This essay does not pass off others' work as my own.

Name: Melanson, C.F.

Date: 9 FEB 2014

“Oglaigh na hEireann” (The Irish Republican Army): An examination of how the IRA manipulated British Security Forces in Ireland to achieve independence.¹

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force Academy, the Air Force, the DoD, or the US Government.

The year was 1916 and the entirety of Western Europe was engulfed in the world's first ever World War. Militarist European governments sent millions of men to the human meat grinder that was the Western Front in France. A stalemate that would almost wipe out an entire generation of Europeans was in full swing and battlefield commanders who had been indoctrinated with the Jominian teachings of Napoleon were refusing to adapt their battlefield tactics to the new technology. This had brought a continental war to a horrid and costly standstill consisting of hundreds of miles of deadly trenches. The British Isles, despite their detachment from mainland Europe, had also been drawn into this grim struggle and were losing millions of young men whose boots needed to be filled. This demand for manpower could not be sustained solely by young British lads from mainland England so the British Empire looked to their colonies and the British Isles to sustain their war effort and in doing so sparked another conflict that would plague them for the remainder of the next century.

Not surprisingly, this demand for manpower led to forced conscription of the Irish people, a predominantly Catholic population who were already not particularly fond of their overbearing Protestant governors. The Military Service Act passed in March of 1916 and just a few weeks later on Easter Monday April 24th, 1916 a group of Irish citizens known as the "Volunteers," led by Eoin MacNeil, seized six important buildings and town centers across Ireland in an attempt to spark a nationwide uprising against British rule.² The British occupational forces in Ireland swiftly and ruthlessly executed them because the British government saw rebellion during wartime as particularly treasonous. Although the "Easter Uprising" was by no means militarily or politically successful and was not "intended as some blood sacrifice" to stir up later revolution that is exactly what happened.³ This bloody rebellion

² Joseph McKenna, *Guerrilla Warfare in the Irish War of Independence, 1919-1921* (McFarland, 2011), 13.

³ Ibid.

would lay the foundation for what would become known as “the Irish troubles,” which would culminate in the Irish War for Independence.⁴ The overbearing manner in which the British responded to the rise of Irish nationalism directly resulted in the Irish War for Independence during which British forces reacted too predictably, were overly forceful, and ran a very poor counterinsurgency resulting in a strengthened resolve of the Irish people despite, and because of, the horrendous acts of violence they endured.

In order to successfully shake the yoke of the British Empire, one of the global superpowers of the early 20th century, Robert Taber, an investigative journalist and author, asserts that the rebel group had to ensure one of two things: either cause the colony of Ireland to be “too great a political embarrassment to be sustained domestically or, on the world stage, to be seen as unprofitable, too expensive, or no longer prestigious.”⁵ The Irish Republican Army (IRA), the militant arm of the self-proclaimed Irish Nationalist’s known as *Sinn Féin* (We Ourselves), employed a strategy that was so successful that it was the bedrock of Taber’s writings on insurgency almost 80 years later. The core members of the newly-formed group known as the IRA had almost all been involved in the Easter Uprising only a few years earlier and before that many of them, including their celebrated leader Michael Collins, helped to found the Gaelic League in 1893.⁶ This association can be seen as the true start of the Irish Nationalist movement during the long twentieth century despite many previous attempts by the Irish to shake the rule of the British Crown. The Gaelic League was dedicated to reminding the Irish people of their Gaelic heritage and that they were a strong and fiercely independent people. However, this group remained non-violent until the Easter Uprising precipitated by the Military Service Act. In this one can begin to see the emergence of a pattern of violent Irish reaction to

⁴ Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare* (Brassey’s, 2002), 101.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶ T. Ryle Dwyer, *Michael Collins: Man Who Won the War* (Mercier Press, Limited, 2009), 26.

overbearing and heavy-handed military actions by the British government in Ireland. This convergence of violent rebellion and the rise in Irish nationalism created the perfect conditions for revolution.

This raises the question of where did these hardcore Irish nationalists come from? Were they members of an oppressed working class fed up with the poor conditions of life under the British Crown? Or were they highly educated scholars who yearned for the same freedoms and independence of their brethren who had immigrated to the United States? In fact, the members of the IRA would come from all walks of life because British oppression affected every Irishman from Belfast to Dingle and therefore “the appeal of militant republicanism crossed all occupational boundaries.”⁷ Despite the socioeconomic variegation amongst IRA members, they possessed a core belief in Catholicism which infused them with an irrepressible religious zeal during the conflict. They also shared regional affiliations because the overwhelming majority of them came from southern Ireland. In the north there was, and still is, a large population of Protestant Scots-Irish and Anglican British immigrants. The his religious undertones of this conflict would go on long after the Irish War for Independence was over in the rest of the country. In fact, Belfast would prove to be one of the most dangerous cities in the world (until the peace agreements were reached in 1998) due to the hardcore militant nature of the indoctrination of members of the IRA at the turn of the 20th century.⁸

However, this group of violent nationalists was still not indoctrinated with the level of zeal seen in many guerilla forces until their detainment in the British Prisoner of War (POW) camp at Frongoch after the Easter Uprising. The facility had previously been used to detain

⁷ Peter Hart, “The Social Structure of the Irish Republican Army, 1916-1923,” *The Historical Journal* 42, no. 1 (March 1, 1999): 11, doi:10.2307/3020901.

⁸ N. B. C. News and Wire Reports, “Clinton Condemns Violence, Revisits Family Legacy in Trip to Belfast,” *NBC News*, accessed February 9, 2014, http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/12/07/15749806-clinton-condemns-violence-revisits-family-legacy-in-trip-to-belfast.

German POWs during the Great War, and the correlation between Irish traitors and the “Hun” enemy was not lost on the populace.⁹ Although the Irish were not treated horribly, the British government detained approximately 1900 of them for nearly six months where they were free to collaborate and exchange ideas.¹⁰ In his biography of Michael Collins and his role in the Irish War for Independence, T. Ryle Dwyer, an Irish native with a PhD in modern history asserts that; it was at Frongoch that Michael Collins would learn a lesson that would be critical in his later defeat of the British forces in Ireland:

“The Easter Rising had taught him that Ireland was not capable of beating the British militarily, but in Frongoch he learned it was possible to beat them by wearing down their patience. ‘Sit down- refuse to budge-you have the British beaten,’ he wrote to a friend. ‘For a time they’ll raise war-in the end they’ll despair.’”¹¹

This lesson learned at Frongoch would directly translate into the IRA’s strategy to defeat the British. Collins learned that in order to achieve his goal of making Ireland a colony that was too costly to continue to rule he would have to outlast the British and wear them down. However, in order to accomplish this objective he would have to obtain the popular support of the Irish people by provoking the British into overreacting and isolating themselves from the population.

Winning the popular support of the people is essential in any guerrilla war because it enables the rebel fighters to hide in plain sight amongst the population. After the Easter rebellion the citizens of Dublin jeered and harassed the Irish prisoners as they were marched in chains through the streets of the Irish capital and “the cause of Irish independence seemed lost.”¹² Although there was a long history of insurrection against British rule in Ireland “the

⁹ Dwyer, *Michael Collins*, 65.

¹⁰ Ibid., 70–75.

¹¹ Ibid., 75.

¹² Taber, *War of the Flea*, 100.

independence movement was lukewarm until fired by the acts of the British themselves.”¹³

So how did the IRA manage to provoke the British into such a fierce overreaction? It began on December 19th, 1919 when the IRA attempted to assassinate the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Viscount French. Although there were other isolated incidents in the next year the British were slow to react to counter the threat of the IRA and began their counterinsurgency in earnest on August 9, 1920 with the passing of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act and the revamping of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC).¹⁴

The RIC had been a long standing police force in Ireland which was nonmilitant and dealt primarily with domestic disputes rather than peacekeeping. Between 1919 and 1920 the poorly trained and poorly equipped RIC began hemorrhaging members in the wake of rebellion led by the IRA. The British government began to fill their ranks with British Army Veterans of the First World War which Winston Churchill, who was the Secretary of State for Colonies and the Air at the time, saw this as solving two problems; it fixed the RIC's manpower crisis so that it could effectively provide security while simultaneously moving large groups of unemployed, violent soldiers out of cities in England. Although the British preferred to use local Irishmen, if possible for intelligence purposes, the RIC's ranks simply could not be filled with local Irishmen alone because the IRA often targeted them for assassinations because they were seen as traitors. This willingness to deal with informants and native Irishmen siding with the British in a ruthless manner was what separated this rebellion from others in the past. The new RIC's uniforms became a hodgepodge of khaki British Army uniforms and black and dark green constabulary uniforms which gave rise to their nickname, the Black and Tans.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid. 100.

¹⁴ D. M. Leeson, *The Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence, 1920-1921* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 14–15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

Despite the Black and Tan's shocking reputation for unchecked violence during the war there was another group that was formed in 1920 to augment the RIC that was much worse; the Auxiliary Division. Major General Hugh Tudor who had experience fighting guerillas during the Boer Wars earlier in his army career, commanded this infamous division.¹⁶ The division augmented the RIC divisions and was composed of very junior British officers and cadets as well as unemployed British Army Officers who had served in WWI.¹⁷

The IRA quickly adopted the use of flying columns, a mobile force of infantry of forty to one hundred men that roamed the countryside causing mayhem, to counter these former military forces. These flying columns had been wildly successful against the British in the Boer Wars and were so again against the "Auxies," as the Irish referred to them, because Michael Collins had the military vision to recognize that a veteran of the Boer War was leading them. These violent, disillusioned, WWI veterans were ill-equipped to run a counterinsurgency and provided the IRA with a target to prod into overreaction; and their violent overreaction was better than anything for which the IRA could have hoped.

Provoking these thugs in order to gain the support of the Irish people would prove to be a simple task for the IRA. Private J.P. Swindlehurst, a private of the RIC during the war, noted that most of the Black and Tans seemed to be "out of work demobbed officers and men who can't seem to settle down."¹⁸ One of the most common tactics utilized in urban areas to provoke retaliation from the Black and Tans was to drop bombs from upper-story-windows of buildings into the Black and Tan's Rolls Royce Armored Cars.¹⁹ The British in turn would stop their convoy and storm into the building searching for the IRA members who had dropped the bomb

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ William Sheehan, *British Voices: From the Irish War of Independence 1918-1921 : The Words of British Servicemen Who Were There* (Collins Press, 2007), 13.

¹⁹ William Henry Kautt, *Ambushes And Armour: The Irish Rebellion 1919-1921* (Irish Academic Press, 2010), 190.

onto their comrades. These unauthorized and oftentimes brutal searches of buildings and homes frequently ended in the British killing young men they suspected of killing their comrades without any evidence or due process of law.²⁰ This proved to be an effective tactic and as W.H. Kautt points out in his book, *Ambushes and Armour*, “virtually any violent action by British forces, however justifiable, helped enemy propaganda. Killing an innocent person had two effects: turning that person’s family against the government and providing more propaganda.”²¹

The morality of the IRA’s tactics may be questionable, but there can be no doubt that they were highly effective in turning the Irish population against British Rule. The lengths to which they were willing to go for their cause could not be comprehended by the British Police forces and they refused to acknowledge that they had only themselves to blame for the level of fanaticism they now faced. Private Swindlehurst described in detail an incident which occurred with members of his police battalion which illustrates the IRA’s willingness to go to any lengths to secure the support of the people. On January 20th, 1921, a group of RIC policemen were patrolling in Northern Dublin when an IRA member took a potshot at the patrol from an alleyway.²² The patrol dropped to a knee and returned a volley of fire in the direction of the gunshot where a group of children who had been startled by the gunshot were running..²³ The children were killed instantly by the barrage and the RIC were thereafter referred to as the “rubber footed murders” due to their rubber-soled boots.²⁴ In the remainder of the journal entry Private Swindlehurst discussed how he is slowly beginning to hate being forced to fight a war in a country which required more and more violent measures against an increasingly hostile population. Not only was the IRA furthering their cause by forcing the British to overreact, but

²⁰ Ibid., 191.

²¹ Ibid., 192.

²² Sheehan, *British Voices*, 21.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 23.

they were beginning to demoralize the enemy and irritate them into making even worse decisions.

The Black and Tans handed the IRA their ultimate propaganda tool in a series of events that began on the 17th of November 1920 with the assassination of RIC sergeant James O'Donaghue in Cork.²⁵ The following day, the 18th of November, three masked men, believed to be Auxiliaries, selected three civilians in the city of Cork and executed them as revenge.²⁶ Three days later, the IRA assassinated a group of twelve British intelligence officers, and on this occasion the RIC's misplaced overreaction would polarize the entire country. Although this assassination was not a great military victory in a conventional sense, the IRA succeeded in the crippling of the British network of informers and their handlers, the intelligence officers, in the city of Cork. This victory continued to manifest itself into a far greater propaganda victory from the Auxie backlash, which would become known as 'Bloody Sunday.'²⁷ A few days later on November 21st, just north of Cork in Croke Park, a highly attended game of Gaelic football between Dublin and Tipperary was underway when a convoy of Auxiliaries and RIC policemen surrounded the stadium and demanded to search every man present.²⁸ Shortly after their arrival an altercation broke out and the RIC and Auxiliaries began firing indiscriminately into the crowd with machine guns and other small arms.²⁹ Although they later claimed that the IRA fired first, the British forces ended up killing twelve and wounding sixty civilians.³⁰ This was the final straw for many Irishmen around the country and there was a subsequent drastic spike in violence from the IRA which would soon after force the British to the peace table.

²⁵ McKenna, *Guerrilla Warfare in the Irish War of Independence, 1919-1921*, 154.

²⁶ Ibid., 154.

²⁷ In reference to the Bloody Sunday on November 21, 1920 in Dublin and not the Bloody Sunday of January 30, 1972 in Derry.

²⁸ Ibid., 155.

²⁹ Ibid. 155.

³⁰ Ibid., 156.

Within a year of 'Bloody Sunday,' the IRA forced the British into suing for peace in Ireland and granted conditional independence to the Irish people. For the old guard of the IRA this peace was amicable as they too were tired of fighting. Michael Collins, the head of the IRA, was reluctant to accept these terms, but eventually traveled to England with the Irish delegation to negotiate a peace. He accepted a conditional peace with the British which immediately splintered the IRA. The leader of *Sinn Fein* and President of the Irish State, Eamon de Valera, disregarded the peace and sparked an internal Irish Civil War. Despite the power struggle that followed the Irish War for Independence, it is amazing that the tiny island country of Ireland managed to throw off the yoke of the British Empire with London being less than 300 miles away as the crow flies. The IRA ran a wildly successful insurgency (its success being of course in its extremely brief nature) that hinged on their ability to successfully provoke the British into over-reacting. Although the RIC and Auxiliaries were well trained and well equipped combat veterans, they were susceptible to provocation by the IRA, and managed to isolate themselves from the population which ensured that the IRA was able to continue to operate with the support of the public. In short, the best weapons the IRA had at its disposal were the very forces formed to hunt them down in the first place.

Word Count: 3,310

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